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## TERRORISM AND THE INTUITIVE JOURNALISTIC NARRATIVE

**ABSTRACT:** *The Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris and the use of the Internet by the so-called Islamic State have yet again raised questions about Western media coverage of terrorist acts. This article reviews recent literature and investigates afresh why terrorist attacks tend to dominate the news agenda. It argues that governments, security forces as well as media organizations need to be aware that a particular mode of storytelling has come to rule journalistic practices. This mode is termed intuitive journalistic narrative here. By investigating historic cases of videos depicting hostages, it is shown how this intuitive narrative contributes to magnifying terrorist acts. The article also shows that media organizations realise this when they find the time to reflect on their practices. Yet lessons learned from previous coverage tend to be easily forgotten when journalists face breaking news situations. Media as well as governments' public affairs officials need to recognize this in their communication activities in crisis situation.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Terrorism, Media, Hostage Videos, Islamic State, Iraq*

Acts of terrorism, particularly of urban terrorism, are often regarded as acts of communication: the violent attack, the suicide bombing, or the hostage taking are means to attract media attention and thereby spread whatever message the perpetrators aim to convey.<sup>1</sup> In the context of the emergence of new and social media, particular importance has been assigned to the instantaneous availability of imagery that serves to magnify 21<sup>st</sup> century “propaganda of the deed.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, current academic and public discourses focus on the threat posed by the so-called ‘Islamic State’ (IS), its brutal killing of hostages, and the impact the distribution of these and other IS messages – especially on Twitter – have on attracting new IS recruits world-wide.<sup>3</sup>

Against the background of these discourses, a fresh look at the journalistic coverage of terrorist violence seems necessary. While not denying the significance of visual representations of violence or the potential power of the new communication space, established journalistic practices of storytelling need to be re-evaluated. These practices, specifically what will be

<sup>1</sup> David Omand: Ethical Guidelines for Using Secret Intelligence for Public Security. In: Review of International Affairs, 19, 2006, 614. See also: Joseph S. Tuman: Communicating Terror: The Rhetorical Dimension of Terrorism, Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 2010), 31–43, and Joshua Alexander Geltzer: US Counter-Terrorism Strategy: Signalling and the Terrorist World-View. London, Routledge, 2010, 10–29.

<sup>2</sup> Neville Bolt: Strategic Communication in Crisis. In: The RUSI Journal 156/4, 2011, 44–53.

<sup>3</sup> Jytte Klausen: Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq. In: Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, 38:1 (2015), 2. James P. Farwell: The Media Strategy of ISIS. In: Survival, 56:6, 49. J. M. Berger – Jonathan Morgan: This ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS supporters on Twitter. The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World Analysis Paper No. 20, March 2015. Available at: [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/03/isis-twitter-census-berger-morgan/brookings-analysis-paper\\_jm-berger\\_final\\_web.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/03/isis-twitter-census-berger-morgan/brookings-analysis-paper_jm-berger_final_web.pdf) (Accessed: 03. 09. 2015.)

termed ‘intuitive journalistic narrative’ here, help explain why mainstream media find it hard to resist following an agenda largely controlled by the group or network behind the terrorist act.

In order to unpack the relationship between terrorist attacks and the media, a brief survey of recent scholarship on media, war, and conflict will be followed by a discussion of television narratives. To analyse the professional practice of employing the ‘intuitive narrative’, one case is discussed in detail: the kidnapping and beheading of the British hostage Ken Bigley in Iraq in 2004. This case also reminds us of the origins of IS a decade ago when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s group used videos showing the beheading of Western hostages to catch the attention of a global audience. Finally, a brief discussion of subsequent cases of hostage takings explores the extent of ‘media learning’ in covering terrorist acts.

## JOURNALISM AND CONFLICT

Media and terrorism are regarded as being closely linked in our media-saturated age. Accordingly, some believe that if journalists toned down or limited their reporting of terrorist acts, the political message associated with the violence would be denied the limelight that the attackers seek.<sup>4</sup> They would be starved of the ‘oxygen of publicity’ as former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher put it in 1981.<sup>5</sup>

Even more than thirty years after Thatcher’s speech, the discourse among defence and security experts echoes her basic assumption. The problem of information management in recent wars and the fight against terrorism is regarded as even more challenging. The challenges of the new media ecology, the immediacy of reporting, or the enemies’ cunning use of new and social media are usually given as examples.<sup>6</sup>

These attitudes are to some extent reflected in the recent media studies literature. When Simon Cottle refers to ‘mediatised conflict’, he argues that 21<sup>st</sup> century conflicts are not only represented or mirrored in the information space. Cottle stresses that in our ‘mediated societies [conflicts] are often known, represented and even discharged through the media’.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the media’s performative representation and enactment of conflicts is important, as well as the space granted to news events (often ritualistically), and how professional journalistic narratives encode ‘stories’ in various cultural situations.

In a similar vein, Hoskins and O’Loughlin stress the interpenetration of media and warfare that they called ‘diffused war’. This war is ‘immersed in and produced through a new media ecology’.<sup>8</sup> War penetrates every walk of mediated life: from news and documentaries to movies, soap operas, as well as to Facebook, podcasts, blogs, and video games. This is a society where ‘mass self-communication’, to employ Manuel Castells’s phrase, profoundly affects the mediation of political violence. In this society, we not only produce some of the globally disseminated content ourselves, we have also learned to become ‘monitorial

<sup>4</sup> Randall G. Bowdish: *Cerberus to Mind: Media as Sentinel in the Fight against Terrorism*. In: *Strategic Insights*, vol. 5, issue 5, 2006. <http://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/11117/bowdishMay06.pdf?sequence=1> (Accessed: 03. 08. 2015.)

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Thatcher: *Speech to American Bar Association*, 15 July 1981. <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=106096> (Accessed: 01. 15. 2015.)

<sup>6</sup> Klausen: *Tweeting the Jihad*, 3–4.

<sup>7</sup> Simon Cottle: *Mediatized Conflicts*. Maidenhead, Open University Press, 2006, 186.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Hoskins – Ben O’Loughlin: *The Media at War*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 7.

citizens' – media users who monitor news and other sources for information that matter to us personally.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, flux and unpredictability are important aspects of social reality.<sup>10</sup> Journalism, faced with 'an unparalleled degree of human agency and user control in our lived experience of mediated reality', has to become fluid itself, embracing uncertainty and complexity.<sup>11</sup>

Dealing with this uncertainty and complexity is not easy. One of the 'coping strategies' for journalists in the highly competitive and increasingly underfunded news business is to rely on their professional practices, often learned in journalism school or similar training courses. These very practices and journalistic narrative constructions that have come to dominate the profession help explain why acts of terrorism in particular tend to attract seemingly disproportionate media attention.

One key feature of journalism – right from its inception in the coffee houses of London and Paris – is that it deals with news as a commodity.<sup>12</sup> Pamphlets as well as early newspapers could only survive if they found readers who were willing to pay for the information provided. This basic principle has not changed, even if the Internet has eroded the traditional funding model of 20<sup>th</sup> century journalism. Consequently, the field of journalism has established professional norms, values, and styles that enable journalists to produce newspapers, broadcasts, and websites that provide useful information. As the journalistic sector expanded, education of journalists was increasingly standardised. Training programmes and university degrees were established, particularly in the United States.<sup>13</sup> These programmes and degrees were instrumental in defining what 'good' journalism ought to look like. Textbooks on how to be a journalist also summarised the news values that aspiring journalists were expected to internalise in order to find good stories and tell them in a way that appealed to readers, listeners, and viewers. Definitions of what journalism is or what news should be providing were consequently formulated. 'News is what's different,' was one of the slogans that quickly became one of the commandments every young journalist was to take to heart.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, journalism trainees learn that consumers of media products do not seem to be interested in the ritual everydayness of our lives. Accordingly, there are certain 'news factors' like the relevance of a story, the scale of the event, its timing, the availability of pictures and its proximity to the readers and viewers that determine newsworthiness.<sup>15</sup>

One additional news factor listed in journalism textbooks is 'drama'. While dramatic events and stories, full of suspense and emotional twists and turns, have traditionally made good newspaper copy, 'drama' and 'conflict' are seen to be even more important in television

<sup>9</sup> Michael Schudson: *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1999. Zygmunt Bauman: *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*. Cambridge, Polity Press, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Deuze: *The Changing Context of News Work: Liquid Journalism and Monitorial Citizenship*. In: *International Journal of Communication*, 2, 2008, 848–865.

<sup>11</sup> Deuze: *The Changing Context of News Work*, 860.

<sup>12</sup> Brian McNair: *What is Journalism?* In: *Making Journalists: Diverse Issues, Global Models*, edited by Hugo de Burgh, London, Routledge, 2005, 27.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Simpson: *Science of Coercion. Communication Research and Psychological Warfare 1945–1960*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1994.

<sup>14</sup> These educational doctrines are not limited to Anglo-Saxon journalism, but dominate journalism textbooks in other Western countries as well. An example is Germany's standard textbook: Walther Von Laroche: *Einführung in den praktischen Journalismus*. Berlin, Econ Verlag, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Jon Smith: *Essential Reporting: The NCTJ Guide for Trainee Journalist*, London, Sage Publications, 2007, 16–22.

newscasts. This focus on dramatic, exciting, and ultimately entertaining events has been criticised as ‘dumbing down’ and endangering the vital political and educational role modern media order to play in liberal democracies. Theodor Adorno warned of the dangers of the ‘culture industry’ immediately after 1945, Neil Postman deplored that we were ‘amusing ourselves to death’ in the 1980s, and Michael Ignatieff noted the growing virtuality of the representation of war, conflict, and violence at the turn of the 21st century.<sup>16</sup> From the perspective of professional journalism, however, ‘drama’ as well as ‘emotion’ are seen as vital elements of news stories.

## INTUITIVE JOURNALISTIC NARRATIVE

This journalistic perspective is succinctly summarised in Al Tompkins’s book *Aim for the heart -- a guide for TV producers and reporters*. Tompkins, a fellow at the Poynter Institute, wrote this ‘guide’ after gaining years of practical experience in American broadcast journalism. For Tompkins, television journalism is about storytelling, which is much more than fact telling. This does not mean news stories on television should not be based on facts and thorough research. A thorough grasp of the facts and the background of an event are necessary to condense what happened in such a way that makes it possible to tell a short, compelling, and factual news story. The key is to find the right focus of the story and to connect it to ‘the viewer’s heart’, as Tompkins puts it.<sup>17</sup>

Tompkins cites a television report he made in 1993 to illustrate his point. He was assigned to cover the return of soldiers from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division from their peacekeeping mission in Somalia. While driving to the airport he considered the various angles of the story. He then decided to focus on an army wife called Marla and her child who were waiting for the return of Marla’s husband. Tompkins ignored traditional and oft-repeated images of an air force plane on the tarmac, soldiers disembarking and running towards their families. Instead, he showed the army wife’s face close-up, expectantly gazing towards the plane, thereby capturing the emotions that Marla was going through. While many of his colleagues told the general story of ‘soldiers coming home’, Tompkins narrated the story ‘Marla awaits husband’. Tompkins finds it useful to reduce the essence of television reports to three words: a subject, a verb and an object. He stresses that the verb is usually the key to a good story. So the story about soldiers returning from Somalia turned out to be about Marla. And she was *waiting* for her husband.

Tompkins’s reduction of the story to three words amounts to what this article terms intuitive journalistic narrative. The narrative revolves around one central character. This could be a person like Marla, a politician, a celebrity, or an institution like the government or the army. This person, institution, or ‘character’ faces a challenge. From a journalistic perspective, the rule is that the greater this challenge, the better the story. Usually, several other players of minor importance are involved, and the story ends with some form of solution. In the above example, Marla is the main character. She faces the challenge of ‘waiting’, which one of the sentences of Tompkins’s report make abundantly clear: ‘To be an Army wife, you

<sup>16</sup> Theodor Adorno – Max Horkheimer: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. London, Verso, 1979. Neil Postman: *Amusing ourselves to Death*, London, Methuen, 1987. Michael Ignatieff: *Virtual War: Kosovo and Beyond*. London, Chatto and Windus, 2000.

<sup>17</sup> Al Tompkins: *Write for the Ear, Shoot for the Eye, Aim for the Heart: A Guide for TV Producers and Reporters*. Lanham, Taylor Trade Publishing, 2002.



have to get good at waiting.<sup>18</sup> There are less important actors, like her child, involved, and the solution is that Marla is reunited with her husband Charles.

The task of journalists is to find this narrative in everyday life. Almost every event that journalists cover contains stories that could be told following this simple scheme. The intuitive journalistic narrative seems straightforward and simple, but knowing who in a certain situation faces the biggest challenge often requires careful analysis. There are, however, events and situations that produce exciting intuitive journalistic narratives in abundance. Wars, conflicts, and terrorist attacks fall into this category. These events generate many stories that are dramatic and powerful. Because of the nature of these events, journalists can easily find many characters who face enormous challenges, possibly even the ultimate challenge of life and death. Indeed, for journalists, it becomes a problem to cope with the overwhelming amount of information available in a very fluid situation full of dangers and uncertainties. The media coverage of one of the many kidnappings in Iraq demonstrates the important role the intuitive journalistic narrative played dealing with the challenges of flux, uncertainty, and immediacy.

## KEN BIGLEY'S KIDNAPPING AND KILLING

Before discussing Ken Bigley's kidnapping in detail, it is worth noting that television news items usually fall in four categories: breaking news, political, or economic news, light news, and investigative reporting. Breaking news increasingly dominate 24-hour news channels.<sup>19</sup> Political or parliamentary reports fall in the category of 'hard news.' Stories about celebrities, sports, or entertainment are usually seen as lighter news. Investigative reports are news items that the media themselves generate. Prominent examples were the reporting of the Watergate scandal in the 1970s or the reporting in the context of Edward Snowden's revelations of US and British intelligence gathering practices.

It is also important to remember that television journalists construct their stories by using not just images, but also narration, sound bites, sound in general, and sometimes music. These elements make television a powerful emotional medium. Appealing to the audience's emotions maybe deplored by many observers, but psychologists agree that an emotional involvement in a story can be beneficial. According to social identity theorists,<sup>20</sup> listeners and viewers recall facts and events easier if they become emotionally involved. Like it or not, television with its appeal to many senses is an emotional medium. Storytelling that is based on the intuitive journalistic narrative tends to make TV stories more emotional still. While there are undoubtedly other factors – 'the spectacle'<sup>21</sup> or imagery,<sup>22</sup> routinely seeking out dramatic and powerful emotional stories of conflict and struggle could play into the hands of terrorists as the case study will show.

<sup>18</sup> Tompkins: *Write for the Ear*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Kieran Baker: *Conflict and Control: The War in Afghanistan and the 24-hour News Cycle*. In: *Media and War*, edited by Daya Kishan Thussy and Des Freedman, London, Sage Publications, 2003, 244–247.

<sup>20</sup> See: Henri Tajfel (ed.): *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982.

<sup>21</sup> Douglas Kellner: *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy: Terrorism, War and Election Battles*, Boulder, Paradigm, 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Barbie Zelizer: *When War is Reduced to a Photograph*. In: *Reporting Wars*, edited by Stuart Allan and Barbie Zelizer, London, Routledge, 2004, 115–35.



Ken Bigley's ordeal began on 16 September 2004. That morning a minivan drew up to his house in an affluent suburb in West Baghdad. According to eye-witnesses, ten militants jumped out of their vehicle and seized Bigley and two of his colleagues, the Americans Eugene Armstrong and Jack Hensley. It soon became clear that the three men had fallen into the hands of one of the most ruthless insurgent groups in Iraq, the Jama'at al-Tawhid wa'al-Jihad, later known as Al Qaeda in Iraq and the origin of what is now IS. The group's leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, had already been responsible for a number of brutal beheadings, among them the widely publicised killing of the American contractor Nick Berg.<sup>23</sup>

Two days after their abduction, al-Zarqawi's group posted a video of the three kneeling and blindfolded hostages on the Internet.<sup>24</sup> A militant wearing a black hood declared that the three men would be killed within two days unless female prisoners held at Abu Ghraib and Umm Qasr prisons were released.<sup>25</sup> A second video, released on 20 September, proved that these were no empty threats. It showed the beheading of Eugene Armstrong and contained a new 24-hour ultimatum stating that 'the head of the other will follow this one' if the group's demands were not fulfilled. When this ultimatum was not met either, the kidnappers killed Jack Hensley and posted a video of his beheading on the Internet on 22 September 2004.<sup>26</sup>

It soon became clear that al-Zarqawi had different plans with Bigley. The 62-year-old civil engineer was the first British hostage in Iraq. This was a 'new' experience for British journalists and their audience. His capture promised the potential to generate more media interest in the United Kingdom than the abduction and killing of Armstrong and Hensley as the two men were not the first Americans whose lives had ended in front of the camera lens of kidnappers. Al Zarqawi's group seemed to have realised this.<sup>27</sup> On the same day the video of Hensley's beheading was released, al-Zarqawi's group posted a video of Bigley. Information about the existence of this video reached the newsrooms of British broadcasters just over an hour before their main evening news bulletins. It did not leave editors a lot of time to make a decision on how to deal with it. All major British television stations decided to show extracts of the video. The grainy footage was a far cry from recent IS video productions. However, it showed Ken Bigley pleading for his life, and this had an immediate impact on the British news agenda. Newspapers picked up on the story the following day, publishing still images of Bigley as well as a transcript of his emotional appeal:

*I don't want to die, I don't deserve it, and neither do those women deserve to be held in the Iraqi prisons. Please, please release the female prisoners who are held in Iraqi prisons. Please help them, I need you to help, Mr Blair. You are now the only person on God's earth*

<sup>23</sup> Dawn Perlmutter: Mujahideen Blood Rituals: The Religious and Forensic Symbolism of Al Qaeda Beheadings. In: *Anthropoetics*, 11:2, 2005–2006, 2. <http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1102/muja.htm> (Accessed: 03. 12. 2015.)

<sup>24</sup> Patrick Cockburn: Iraqis tell Britain: Release our prisoners or we will kill hostage. In: *The Independent on Sunday*, 19 September 2004, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Adrian Blomfield: Hostages will die within 48 hours, say Iraqi kidnappers. *The Sunday Telegraph*, 19 September, 2004, 26. For a summary of Bigley's 23-day captivity see: *The Bigley Killing: One Man's Ordeal: How the story unfolded*, *The Observer*, 10 October 2004, 16, and *Timeline: Ken Bigley*, BBC News Online, October 8, 2004: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3726846.stm> (Accessed: 03. 01. 2015.)

<sup>26</sup> The videos are still available on the Internet, e.g. on websites like 'goregrish.com': <https://goregrish.com/video/83/jack-hensley-beheading> (Accessed: 03. 08. 2015.)

<sup>27</sup> As Michael Ignatieff put it: 'An accomplished terrorist – al-Zarqawi is undoubtedly one – understands us better than we seem to understand him.' Michael Ignatieff: *The Terrorist as Film Director*. In: *The Sunday Times*, 11 November 2004, 4.

*that I can speak to. ... Please, please help me to see my wife who cannot go on without me. And my son. (Breaks down) Please help me ... please help me.*<sup>28</sup>

Realising that the kidnappers did not intend to kill Bigley as quickly as his American colleagues, Bigley's family in Liverpool tried to help. They organised press conferences, appealing to the kidnappers to spare Bigley's life as well as putting pressure on the government of then Prime Minister Tony Blair to work for Bigley's release. In turn, Tony Blair and Jack Straw, then Foreign Secretary, involved the American as well as the Iraqi governments. Bigley's kidnapping became a major news story in Britain and continued to dominate the media as well as the political agenda until mid-October 2004.

Al-Zarqawi's group fuelled the story with the release of another video on 29 September 2004. Bigley, again dressed in an orange jumpsuit to make him appear like one of the Muslim prisoners held at Guantanamo Bay, was filmed in a cage. This 'staging' was not only directed at the British public. It was also designed to appeal to the audience in Iraq and the Middle East in an attempt to demonstrate that the US and its allies were not all-powerful.<sup>29</sup> This message apparently fell on fertile ground: CDs with hostage videos were reportedly proving very popular merchandise in Baghdad.<sup>30</sup> Bigley was made to repeat the same pleas as in the first video, directly addressing Prime Minister Blair, but he seemed increasingly distressed. By now his ordeal had become a global news story. Other governments became involved. The Irish prime minister offered Bigley an Irish passport in the hope that this would save his life. But these attempts were in vain. On 8 October 2004 Abu Dhabi television received the video that showed Ken Bigley's beheading. The kidnappers had either decided that they had received sufficient media attention or they might have felt increasing military pressure on their hideout. Al-Zarqawi had certainly made his point: the kidnapping of Bigley and his American colleagues had dominated the news agenda for 23 days. Questions about Tony Blair's Iraq policy were raised not only by Ken Bigley's family but also in the British parliament.<sup>31</sup> The hostage taking also demonstrated to a local and global audience that Iraqi insurgents were not completely powerless in the face of the occupation of their country.

While the story of Ken Bigley's ordeal was unfolding, some journalists asked to what extent they had become tools of terrorist activity. Broadcasters were aware that the videos were being drip fed to maximise their impact.<sup>32</sup> This suggested al-Zarqawi's thorough understanding of how Western news channels operated. The availability of new material to 'freshen up' the reporting certainly made it easier for journalists to keep the story alive. However, the 'drip feeding' of the videos were not the only reason why the Bigley story came to dominate the news agenda. This article argues that by following the intuitive narrative, as journalists had been trained to do, the story developed a life of its own and led journalists to neglect the ethical guidelines that the profession has given itself.<sup>33</sup>

The dramatic and emotional appeal of the main story 'Ken Bigley pleads for his life' – to use Al Tompkins simple sentence structure – is immediately apparent. Ken Bigley, the main

<sup>28</sup> Edited version of Ken Bigley's video message: Plea to Prime Minister. In: The Guardian, 23 September 2010, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Makram Houry-Machoo: Kidnap Videos: Setting the Power Relations of New Media. In: Communicating War: Memory, Media and Military edited by Sarah Maltby and Richard Keeble, Bury St. Edmunds, Arima Publishing, 2007, 163.

<sup>30</sup> Luke Harding: Iraq crisis: brutal kidnappers gain in popularity. In: The Guardian, 21 September 2004, 4.

<sup>31</sup> Jamie Wilson – Matthew Taylor: For family, a horrific wait in vain. In: The Guardian, 9 October 2004, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Jon Snow interview. In: Documentary by Jason Burk: Channel Terror, BBC, 2005.

<sup>33</sup> For an overview of ethics guidelines and rules see Matthew Kieran (ed.): Media Ethics, London, Routledge, 1998.

character, faced the ‘ultimate’ challenge. He was held in captivity, his fellow hostages had been executed, he was dressed in prison clothing, and he was pleading for his life, breaking down in the process. Ken Bigley himself mentioned other players in this story: his family and Prime Minister Tony Blair. Importantly, these actors became main characters in their own right as the days went by. Bigley’s mother, his son, and his wife had to deal with major challenges as well. They tried to save Bigley’s life. They pleaded with the hostage takers; they appealed to politicians and kidnappers. They were propelled into the limelight and had to deal with publicity and instant fame. This as well as the reaction of the wider community in Liverpool amounted to powerful, dramatic, and emotional stories.

The Prime Minister and his reaction also became a story. He himself faced a major challenge: how would he react to Bigley’s ordeal? How would he deal with being appealed to directly? Could he do anything to rescue Bigley? Tony Blair’s involvement provided journalists with a major political story. At the same time, the Bigley story provided ‘breaking news’. Constant updates were provided, not only by new videos the kidnappers released, but also by relatives speaking out or through the release of official statements from the government. The story was also a light news story, a human-interest story. Bigley was a normal citizen, with a normal family living in Liverpool. The whole city of Liverpool became involved and held vigils and prayer services. This provided additional material for journalists, additional images they could use, additional stories that could be told. In short, the Bigley story had it all: it provided breaking news, hard political stories, and human interest stories. Exciting and unusual imagery in the form of grainy videos was available as well as material from Westminster and various locations in Liverpool. In essence, the kidnappers planted the seeds with their videos of the main emotional story of Ken Bigley facing imminent death. The additional stories following the journalistic narrative of main characters facing challenges in a very difficult situation were created in the Western media spaces – basically intuitively and more like a reflex than following editorial reflection.

## EVOLUTION: MEDIA LEARNING

The scope and intensity of the media coverage of Bigley’s plight did worry several journalists – even while the crisis was going. ‘We must stop bolstering the beheaders’ demanded the Guardian’s David Aaronovitch on 28 September 2004, one day before the video depicting Ken Bigley in a cage was made public. He quoted the father of Daniel Pearl, one of the first Westerners to be killed in front of a camera well before the invasion of Iraq, who had called the videoed beheadings ‘exhibition killings’. Aaronovitch deplored that journalists now monitored extremist websites constantly in order not to miss the latest video of Western hostages or other cruelties. He proposed that journalists ‘should not broadcast images, appeals and statements that clearly vindicate the Nazi-like criminality of men like Zarqawi’.<sup>34</sup>

This self-restraint did not materialise during the Bigley crisis. Bigley’s beheading was not shown on television, but his final video was – up to the point when the killer took out his knife.<sup>35</sup> Showing hostages under duress and facing imminent death went against previous principles of British journalism, as the former editor-in-chief of ITN, Stewart Purvis, pointed out:

<sup>34</sup> David Aaronovitch: We must stop bolstering the beheaders. In: *The Guardian*, 20 September 2004, G2, 9.

<sup>35</sup> The report of CBS’s Mark Philips on 9 October 2010 for instance showed 30 seconds of the final video, including Bigley’s last words and the beginning of the killing.

*'There was a convention in British broadcasting that said it was really not proper to actually transmit the words of somebody who had been kidnapped or was being held hostage in some other way. In other words, someone who had lost control of their [sic] own ability to speak freely. And the view was that by transmitting the words out of people's mouths that weren't really their own words, you were in a sense playing the terrorists' game.'*<sup>36</sup>

Some European broadcasters, German public television for instance, followed these 'old-fashioned' rules and refrained from showing Ken Bigley's video or even still images of his captivity in news bulletins. It took British broadcasters not much longer to return to the same principles. When Margaret Hassan, a British Care worker, was kidnapped in Iraq shortly after Bigley's beheading,<sup>37</sup> it quickly became clear that British news media were keen to show more restraint. The BBC, after initially broadcasting short clips of videos showing Hassan pleading for her life, reverted to still images of her, only reading out excerpts of what she had said in her videos. As the then head of BBC News, Roger Mosey, put it:

*'I think the BBC took a more conservative view ... I have no doubt that at times we showed less than our rivals did. And we were very happy with that. I think where they ended up, interestingly, was in a very similar place to where we were. So in fact the policy on Sky and ITN became more conservative and even some Middle East broadcasters ... there was a time when we were waiting for footage from Abu Dhabi TV and they also decided not to broadcast some of the terrorist videos. So overall the broadcasters I think moved to our position.'*<sup>38</sup>

Even more restrained was the coverage of the hostage taking of the Briton Peter Moore. He and his four bodyguards were kidnapped in 2007 by a different group – al-Zarqawi had been killed by an American air strike in 2006. Nevertheless, the operation of the group that seized Moore was spectacular in size: more than 30 militants dressed in police uniforms were involved. This operation received coverage in the British media. However, as time went by and despite the release of videos showing Peter Moore, news coverage was limited. Interviews with the relatives of the victims were also very rare and controlled. They usually took place in groups of several relatives, with the knowledge and corporation of the British Foreign Office. While this certainly deprived the kidnappers of the publicity they might have been seeking, the fate of the hostages remained terrible. Peter Moore spent two years in captivity and was released in December 2009, several months after his bodyguards had been killed one after the other.<sup>39</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Terrorists seek publicity to spread fear and make their messages heard. The intuitive journalistic narrative is one of the reasons why terrorism-related stories like the kidnapping of Ken Bigley can come to dominate television news. This narrative is an essential element

<sup>36</sup> Stewart Purvis interview. In: Documentary by Jason Burk, Channel Terror, BBC (2005).

<sup>37</sup> For a summary of her kidnapping see Daniel McGory: Last moments of woman who knew she was to die. In: The Times, 17 November 2004, 5.

<sup>38</sup> Roger Mosey interview. In: Documentary by Jason Burk, Channel Terror, BBC, 2005.

<sup>39</sup> For a wealth of material on Peter Moore – including speculations about Iran's involvement in the hostage taking – see a collection of articles and videos in The Guardian: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/mar/15/peter-moore-hostage-video> (Accessed: 03. 08. 2015.)

in the habitual and ritualized coverage of rolling television news stations. It led British and international media to follow an agenda essentially controlled by Ken Bigley's kidnappers. In addition, widely accepted and practiced narrative constructions of news in accordance with principles like 'newness', 'drama', and 'conflict' played an important part in determining the prominence of the Ken Bigley story.

There are no doubt other reasons why terrorist attacks and kidnappings are sometimes not treated with more restraint. In Ken Bigley's case, Iraq was very high on the news agenda in 2004, making hostage crises in that country more likely to pass the journalistic filters. Moreover, the use of video technology and the Internet in the digital age also posed new questions that journalists, under the heavy pressure of real-time news, had to grapple with:<sup>40</sup> the hostage videos were readily available to anyone on the Internet, altering television journalism's gate-keeping role and begging the question if failing to screen extracts on mainstream television would have made a difference. Indeed, there was an active demand for these gruesome videos. The Sunday Telegraph reported that a Dutch pornography website received a record number of hits when it posted a copy of Bigley's video.<sup>41</sup> While these aspects of terrorism and its representation in the media have been debated before,<sup>42</sup> the intuitive journalistic narrative also plays an important role.

Being aware of this narrative structure leads to a better understanding of why media professionals, under certain circumstances, intuitively jump on dramatic stories and magnify them by finding related stories of similar power and emotional attraction. In this process, media coverage can develop a life of its own. The Bigley story serves as a prime example. Interestingly, it also demonstrated that once the narrative is established, contrarian positions have little chance of gaining public support. Boris Johnson, the current Mayor of London but then conservative Member of Parliament, faced fierce criticism for an article he published in his magazine *The Spectator*. Vigils in Bigley's home town demonstrated in Johnson's view that Liverpoolians were wallowing in their victim status and had overreacted to Bigley's killing. This caused a public outcry and Johnson quickly apologised for his remarks.<sup>43</sup>

Western media dealt with subsequent hostage crises differently. Freed from the pressure of the immediacy dominating the competitive news business, new practices emerged that took account of the human rights and the dignity of the hostages and their relatives. Simultaneously, these practices undermined terrorist narratives and deprived hostage takers of the limelight they were seeking. Editors and journalists re-discovered their long-established ethical principles. After all, journalism schools and colleges do not only teach reporters how to detect intuitive narratives and tell powerful stories, they usually also include lessons on ethical standards. In crisis situation, however, the intuitive reaction of journalists is to look for 'good' stories first and consider the ethical consequences later. This is particularly true in novel situations for which no professional standards and practices exist. In the wake of Ken Bigley's ordeal, journalists and editors eventually learned important lessons and managed to re-establish the balance between storytelling and ethics.

<sup>40</sup> Stewart Purvis interview. In: Documentary by Jason Burk, Channel Terror, BBC, 2005.

<sup>41</sup> Olga Craig: The new tricoteuses. In: The Sunday Telegraph, 17 October 2004, 24.

<sup>42</sup> On the pressure of new media and the Internet see for example: Daniel Matheson and Stuart Allan: Digital War Reporting, Cambridge, Polity Press 2009. Dan Gilmore: We, the media: grassroots journalism by the people for the people, Sebastopol, O'Reilly, 2004.

<sup>43</sup> Helen Carter – Patrick Wintour: Johnson apologises after article claims Liverpool overdid morning. In: The Guardian, October 16, 2004, 1.

A decade after the beheading of Ken Bigley, it has become clear that it remains a challenge for journalists to establish and adhere to professional practices that help maintain this balance. The coverage of recent IS atrocities and the attention global media devoted to beheading videos made and distributed by IS demonstrate that some lessons have to be re-learned. There was generally much more restraint in airing these brutal and shocking videos in mainstream media, yet IS managed to set the global media agenda. The intuitive journalistic narrative was at work again, be it in the coverage of John Cantlie,<sup>44</sup> the British photojournalist whom IS uses as a kind of war correspondent or in the stories about ‘Jihadi John’,<sup>45</sup> the British born IS fighter depicted as the executioner in several beheading videos. Not only journalists should be reminded that their own practices and their way of telling stories potentially serve the interest of groups like IS. Governments and security forces should also be constantly aware of the power of the intuitive journalistic narrative to dominate the news agenda when they formulate their public reactions towards terrorist violence.

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<sup>44</sup> See on the last video in the IS ‘series’: N.N.: ‘John Cantlie: British photojournalist appears in new Isis propaganda video’. In: The Independent, 10 February 2015.

<sup>45</sup> Particular attention was devoted to the story when the real name of ‘Jihadi John’ became known. British news outlets constantly updated the story on live web pages. See for example: ‘Jihadi John named as Mohammed Emwazi: February 27 as it happened’. In: The Daily Telegraph, 27 February 2015. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11436615/Jihadi-John-named-as-Mohammed-Emwazi-live.html> (Accessed: 03. 12. 2015.)



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